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### Recent Themes in the History of Africa and the Atlantic World: Historians in Conversation

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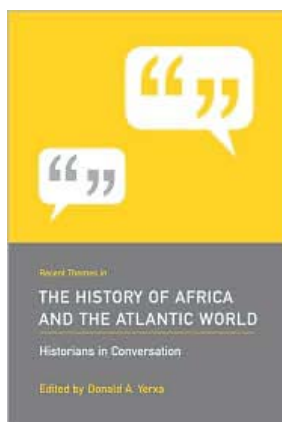
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## September 2011 Newsletter



Donald A. Yerxa, editor. *Recent Themes in the History of Africa and the Atlantic World: Historians in Conversation*. Historians in Conversation Series. Columbia: University of South Carolina Press, 2008. 128 pp., Hardcover, ISBN-13: 9781570037573.

Reviewed for the African Diaspora Archaeology Newsletter by Rachel L. Horlings, Director of Underwater Research and Coordinator for Archaeology, Bunce Island Coalition.

This book is an engaging collection of eighteen short articles written by fourteen different historians from a range of backgrounds, including both Africanists and non-Africanists. It is the result of two series of exchanges originally printed in the November/December 2004 and the January/February 2006 editions of the journal *Historically Speaking*, and represents historians in “conversation” about the Atlantic world. Yerxa, as editor, frames the discussions in terms of the challenges that face historians (and therefore also archaeologists) today, specifically, “constructing narratives that give coherence to a messy and complex past without sacrificing its richness and texture” (p. 3). It is a short book with plenty to digest, although its ease of reading makes it deceptive in terms of its depth and complexity. The bulk of the text consists of two discussions, one centered around defining Africa and its place in world history, and the other concerning the veracity of Olaudah Equiano’s historical account. The basic format is a “challenge essay” in which an author (Joseph Miller in the first case and Vincent Carretta in the second) presents potentially controversial or challenging perspectives. These are then addressed in short essays, directly or indirectly, by a number of authors; eight of whom respond directly to Miller’s challenge, and three to Carretta’s. A rejoinder essay by the initiating author is presented at the end of each conversation. Two additional essays by David Northrup and Trevor Burnard

provide pertinent, although more loosely-related perspectives, and are strategically placed after the first discussion and before the second (chapters 11 and 12).

Miller opens the first conversation with the premise that Africa should be addressed and engaged with on “African” terms and perspectives, while at the same time emphasizing that there are “multiple historical realities” (p. 17) present in world historical processes. Although he uses two examples of these “African” perspectives – those of African politics and Africans’ perceptions of the slave trade through the lens of witchcraft – his essay is general and lacks the specificity an archaeologist would value in such an argument. Ricardo Duchesne, Patrick Manning, and William McNeil, while appreciating Miller’s overall argument, provide some strong critiques concerning methodologies, problems with the multicentric approach, and issues with creating generic “African” responses (chapters 2-4). David Northrup, Jonathan Reynolds, and John Thornton generally continue the critique, but take the exchanges in somewhat different directions, offering alternative solutions, suggestions and perspectives (chapters 5, 6, and 9). Michael Salman and Ajay Skaria take the conversation into deep theoretical territory, involving the reader in debates that expand the already broadly-engaged discussion of Africa and its place in world history (chapters 7 and 8). While Miller’s final response comments (chapter 10) re-emphasize the academic nature of the discussions, they seem to leave most of the critiques and suggested alternative perspectives unaddressed.

The second conversation in the book has a dramatically different feel than the first, presumably due to the fact that it engages with a significantly different scale of African and Atlantic pasts. The focus is on Vincent Carretta’s assertion (chapter 13) that there is evidence that Olaudah Equiano may have “invented rather than reclaimed an African identity” (p. 81) in his seminal 18th century narrative, *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano, or Gustavus Vassa, the African, Written by Himself* (London 1789). Carretta claims that even if this is the case, however, his historical significance is not negated. His thesis inevitably elicits varying degrees of emotions, as it is more personal, perhaps, than the grander or more obscure concepts of Africa as a whole and its place in Atlantic and world history. Three dramatically different interpretations and responses from Paul Lovejoy, Trevor Burnard and Jon Sensbach follow (chapters 14-16), highlighting the complex understandings of historians concerning epistemology of knowledge in the Atlantic world, and the ways people interpret, accept, and critique data and the work of other scholars. Carretta’s final responses match the tones of the

various discussions, ultimately leaving the door open for others to join the exchange (chapter 17). Although not altogether necessary, a short essay by Yerxa providing concluding reflections to tie the conversations and book together would likely have been helpful, as the book ends rather more abruptly than the reader is accustomed to throughout its discussions.

True to its name, this book gives the feeling of being privy to intense, multifaceted, and even personal conversations among groups of historians. As with any conversation “overheard” by someone not a part of it (i.e., archaeologists), some conversationalists are easier to follow than others, but generally the discussions are accessible to a broad audience. As questions or critiques arise in the mind of the reader, they are almost always addressed in some way and to some degree by one of the contributors, the result of which often provides a completely different perspective. This book draws attention to concepts and ideas that we as historical and/or Africanist archaeologists too often take for granted or use less critically than we should, and is a useful tool for generating discussion among researchers, graduates, and undergraduate classes related to African, Atlantic, and world histories.

History and archaeology are all too often uncomfortable bedfellows, and yet, particularly when it comes to investigating the relationships of Africa and the historic Atlantic world, these two fields not only are complementary, they need each other. A few Africanists in both disciplines have recognized this (DeCorse and Chouin 2003; Robertshaw 2000; Vansina 1995), but calls for engagements and collaborations between the fields have only been faintly answered. This book, while neither intended as an explicit answer to this call, nor addressing the intersection with archaeology other than infrequently and in passing, provides an excellent means for archaeologists and others to “see” into how historians are thinking about and grappling with the concepts of Africa, its place in the Atlantic world, and how we know what we know about it. Its pertinent conversations provide yet another opportunity for explicit intersection between researchers engaging with the Atlantic world. It also unintentionally illustrates the disconnects that result from the lack of interdisciplinary inquiry; or rather, it highlights areas which could only benefit from the cooperative investigation of sibling disciplines. Michael Salman (p. 47) writes in it that “history is a rambunctious dialogue with the past.” I would argue, based on this book, it is also a rambunctious conversation with the present, a conversation in which both historians and archaeologists need to participate.

## References

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